

Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project

**INTEGRATING PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM
AND CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT IN MALAWI**

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Report prepared by:

Hartford Mchazime

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Introduction

In 2000 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Malawi asked the Improving Educational Quality II (IEQ) Project and the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) to assist the Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) in the development of a model for continuous assessment in Malawi primary schools. The request came about as a result of a number of concerns over declining primary school pupils' examination scores. For example, research done by the Improving Education Quality II/Malawi (IEQ/Malawi) Project in Mangochi and Balaka districts revealed that pupils in Standards 3 and 4 were unable to read and write, or carry out basic mathematic operations (Chilora, 2001). Other organisations such as the Southern African Consortium on Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) also came up with similar results particularly in literacy (Milner et al, 2001). Milner and her colleagues found that only 21% of Standard 6 pupils in their sample had reached the minimum mastery level in reading and less than 1% had reached what they called the desired level.

There was also a concern over increasing numbers of pupil dropouts and an increased interest among the educational community to develop relevant and effective continuous assessment methods. It was felt that effective continuous assessment would help teachers understand what learners know, understand and can do. The result of analysing pupil assessment by teachers would lead to teachers taking pedagogical action for greater pupil learning.

MOEST and USAID sponsored consultancies, workshops and forums on continuous assessment in the late 1990s increased interest in and an awareness of continuous assessment methods as well as the link between good continuous assessment and increased learning. These efforts created among Malawian educators and policy-makers the sense that effective continuous assessment could contribute to increased pupil achievement, and retention, and improved teachers' pedagogy.

A number of other concerns have also been expressed about the current primary school curriculum. Malawian educationalists feel that the curriculum is elitist and that it does not give pupils skills that would make them survive once they leave school. They also feel that the political changes that had taken place in 1994 which brought in democracy and its related institutions that nurture democratic principles need to be reflected in the curriculum. These factors and a few others have prompted the Ministry of Education Science and Technology in collaboration with the MIE to embark on a curriculum reform. This reform has appropriately been called Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR). The inclusion of assessment in the reform process shows that Malawian educators are interested in integrating assessment with the curriculum. This presentation discusses the potential that now exists to integrate continuous assessment with the primary school curriculum.

Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform Process

The Ministry of Education and the Malawi Institute of Education appointed a co-ordinating committee known as Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR) to guide the curriculum and assessment reform process. Members of the co-ordinating committee were aware of the context and the climate under which the proposed curriculum was going to be built. They therefore needed to develop a framework that was going to ensure wider consultation than in the 1991 curriculum and greater participation of stakeholders in the process. It was convinced that it was only through participatory approach that Malawi would be able to build a responsive and an inclusive curriculum that its citizens aspire.

The framework includes processes of reforming the curriculum and development of assessment procedures (see Appendix). Since the framework puts curriculum and assessment side by side and that the curriculum should be developed in collaboration with assessment there seems to be an opportunity for integrating continuous assessment with the curriculum. The potential for integration is perhaps increased by the fact that the Coordinator of IEQ/Malawi participates in PCAR planning meetings.

STRATEGIES

There were two major strategies that the PCAR committee used namely, communication and data collection strategies. The communication strategy was created to be used as a communication channel to the public about what the committee was doing at each stage of the process and to bounce views, voices and visions of findings from consultations and other sources to the public for reactions. Data collection strategies were meant to streamline sources of information to be included for collecting and identifying needs that would form the basis for building up the new curriculum. These included interviews with a cross-section of the population in the country, literature reviews - both national and international, and school visits and classroom observations. Of particular interest was an international conference on curriculum and classroom practice. Participants to the conference came from 6 Southern African countries. Each country was requested to send an officer from a curriculum centre and a practising primary school teacher to share their experiences with their Malawian counterparts. It is interesting that the conference did not include people from assessment departments in these countries although the reform is about curriculum and assessment. By inviting curriculum specialists and practising teachers only, PCAR committee seemed to have missed the link between assessment and curriculum.

However, in a national conference earlier primary school teachers indicated that in terms of assessment they usually gave tests on a regular basis but these were not meant to help pupils to master what the curriculum wanted them to understand and to do. It seems the tests were meant to show the teacher and the pupils where each pupil stood in relation to other pupils in the class. Assessment was seen not

so much as part of the curriculum but more as a tool for pupil ranking and placement. In any case, although teachers said what they were doing was continuous assessment it was in fact continuous testing.

It was at this conference that an opportunity for discussing the relationship between testing and continuous assessment arose. After the presentation on assessment participants to the conference worked in groups where they discussed assessment. Reports from the groups showed that there was a lack of clear understanding of continuous assessment but they indicated that its purpose was to find out about what pupils had learned. Thus assessment was still seen as something coming at the end of teaching.

Although this was the teachers understanding and practice the IEQ II/Malawi felt that assessment should be an integral part of the curriculum. Continuous assessment as defined by the IEQ II team was seen as a possibility. The working definition of the team is that continuous assessment is a way of finding out what pupils know, understand and can do. Its purpose is to promote learning although it may lead to evaluation. Information from assessment should help the teacher to improve his/her teaching and then lead to improved pupil learning. The team therefore began to work on a model of continuous assessment which would integrate continuous assessment with the curriculum. It took topics from the current curriculum and teachers who were trying the model were teaching following the curriculum. The development of the model followed a particular pattern in a feasibility study described below.

The Coordinator of IEQ/Malawi was intimately involved in every aspect of the model development and was regularly engaged in a dialogue with the PCAR committee about what was happening in the feasibility study. The Coordinator also organised updates for curriculum specialists at the Malawi Institute of Education. In a way this was meant to prepare the minds of both PCAR members and the curriculum specialists at the Malawi Institute of Education for future possible integration of continuous assessment with the intended curriculum.

The Feasibility Study

In November and December 2001 the IEQ II/Malawi and other stakeholders in education held some meetings to discuss the possibility of conducting a feasibility study on continuous assessment. The stakeholders included the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the Save the Children Federation (US), who are IEQ's partners, Campaign for Creative Community Mobilisation (CCRECOM) USAID and the Malawi Institute of Education. The proposal to conduct the feasibility study was accepted and a national steering committee was formed with members drawn from the stakeholders and from Ntcheu district education office.

In January 2002 the feasibility study was started in Ntcheu district. Twenty-one primary schools were chosen using a stratified random sampling. Other factors considered in the sampling were socio-economic and physical features of the district. The class chosen was Standard 3 because USAID was interested in it. In Malawi Standard 3 is crucial in that most children become literate between Standards 3 and 4. Also many children in Malawi drop out of the school system during the first four years of schooling before they become functionally numerate and literate. Three subjects were chosen namely, Mathematics, Chichewa and English. Chichewa is Malawi's national language and English is an official language.

PRINCIPLES OF THE STUDY

The design of the study was based on four main principles. First, it was agreed that the study should be carried out within the context in which Malawian primary schools operate. Conditions in Malawi are such that teachers handle large classes with minimum instructional materials available. Many of the teachers are either untrained or under-qualified. Secondly, the study should focus on improving teachers' practices in the classroom and thirdly, it should be curriculum-based. Finally the assessment should be classroom based aiming at improving pupil learning rather than using it for selection purposes. Thus the main focus of the study was on improvement of pupil progress and teachers professional skills within the Malawian context.

TRAINING TEACHERS

Fifty-one Standard 3 teachers and head teachers from the 21 schools attended the initial training course at the Malawi Institute of Education. The content of the course included a definition of and an understanding of the concept "continuous assessment" which the IEQ team defined as a way of finding out what pupils know, understand and can do. Other topics included continuous assessment techniques, recording pupil progress and record keeping, managing large classes, remediation and enrichment strategies, how to prepare and use locally available resources in lessons and how to motivate pupils.

The training mode was participatory and practical. The teachers were given opportunities to practice their newly acquired skills at a nearby school. Lessons were then analysed by peers with the support their trainers known as Teaching and Support Team (TST). The support team comprised college tutors, Primary Education Advisors (PEAs), Senior Education Methods Advisors (SEMAS) from the ministry, and the research team from IEQ II/Malawi. A member from The American Institutes for Research (AIR) was part of the team.

After the training the participants were given some notebooks for pupil records. They also took with them all the teaching and learning materials they had prepared during the training. Head teachers were

asked to go and hold meetings with community members and parents. The purpose of the meetings was not only to inform the community about what was happening at their school but also to encourage them to participate in the education of their children at curriculum level. They could do this in a number of ways such as checking their children's notebooks and providing locally available materials for use in teaching and teachers. It was also a way of opening up the school to the public.

At the meetings parents were told about the new form of assessment and what they should expect from their children. For instance, instead of the ranking their children after writing end-of-term tests, they would be given information about what their children knew and what they could do. They would for example, be told what their children were able to read and write in English and Chichewa or what sort of mathematical problems they were able to solve.

FIELD SUPPORT

When the teachers went back to their schools the support team followed them to provide field support two times per term. Primary Education Advisors from Ntcheu, who were members of the support team, were expected to visit the schools more often. The team observed lessons as well as how the teachers were assessing their pupils. They then provided immediate feedback to the teachers. Teachers themselves discussed their observations on what they were experiencing both in class and in their communities.

The support team also interviewed the teachers, head teachers and pupils on their views about how the teachers were teaching and assessing the students. They also examined pupil progress books and how teachers were using rainbow charts. This information was collected each time the teaching and support team visited the schools. The information from the field was used to help in the planning of the next training session organised during holidays but close to the beginning of the following term. The information was also kept at the IEQ offices for research purposes.

The second, third and fourth training started with reflections of the previous term's experiences. Teachers were first grouped according to the schools they came from to discuss and document their successes and any challenges they faced in the previous term. They were also asked to discuss why they were not able to overcome the challenges and to make suggestions for overcoming the challenges.

Documentation from the school reflections was used in a training plenary session where each school presented their experiences. This forum allowed an exchange of the inter-school experiences thereby affording the teachers an opportunity for cross-fertilisation of experiences and development of a psychological anchor which comes with the sharing of similar experiences. The TST team then built the actual training on these experiences to consolidate the good practice and to set pointers to further professional development. Each subsequent training was slightly more advanced than the previous one

so the last training was seen as the most advanced for the teachers. This incremental provision of training, arising mostly from the teachers' needs and built upon their own experiences proved to be satisfying to the teachers.

A teacher from Manjawila School had this to say after the second training session:

I am very grateful to the IEQ team at the Malawi Institute of Education for the work they are doing. I am untrained teacher but now I feel very confident when I stand in front of my class because I know what I am supposed to be doing, that is to make my pupils learn.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Systematic analysis of the data collected over the whole one year period has just started but preliminary results seem to show the following:

IMPROVED PUPIL-TEACHER RELATIONS

In almost all the schools a randomly stratified sample of pupils were asked the question "If someone transferred your teacher to day what would you do?" Two common answers that the pupils gave were "I would stop schooling or I would hate such a person." A supplementary question was "Why would you do that?" The pupils answered, "Our teacher does not beat us. He is friendly. When we ask questions he does not shout at us but answers us well. We are not afraid of him."

IMPROVED PUPIL ACHIEVEMENT

At Msiyaludzu School, teachers organised an Open Day to which parents, community members and local leaders were invited. IEQ was also invited. There were a number of activities including traditional dances, recitals and reading in both Chichewa and English. There was also display of teaching and learning using locally available resources (TALULAR). Many people were impressed with both the display and the pupils' show. At the end of the day one parent whose child was in Standard 3 stood up and said, "I wish to say that I am happy with what the Standard 3 teacher is doing at this school. My child is now able to read and write. I wish to encourage other teachers to be doing what the teacher is doing."

INCREASED TEACHER CONFIDENCE

Many teachers seem to be more confident not only in how to handle and teach students but also in how they assess their students. The example of the teacher from Manjawila School above is a case in point. Another teacher from Gumbu School has been invited to one international conference and two national conferences in Malawi where she was specifically asked to present what she does in continuous assessment at her school. She has also appeared on the national television network. She

was a member of a panel discussion group on curriculum and assessment reform in Malawi. Head teachers have also reported that they have witnessed improved teacher attendance. They have also reported that they have seen a marked improvement in pupil attendance since the feasibility study was introduced in their schools.

Insights from the Feasibility Study

At the fourth training workshop in January, 2003 teachers said that the feasibility study seemed to succeed because of four contributing factors. The first is the incremental professional training that the teachers received at regular intervals. They said the training always came at the time when they most needed it. The second is the regular field support. The support that the TST team gave them in the field helped them to correct their mistakes before they took roots and gave them confidence in doing things that the TST team said they were doing well. The third is team spirit created by the feasibility study. All Standard 3 teachers together with their head teachers worked together as a team. The class teachers prepared their lessons and assessment materials together. They were therefore interdependent.

The final factor is community involvement. Because of several meetings with parents and community members and the initial results coming out of the feasibility classes parents began to support the teachers with locally available teaching materials, provision of safe storage for instructional materials and even checking their children's notebooks. In the words of one teacher from Nsipe the community started to appreciate what the teachers were doing. As a result, teachers felt that they were being valued.

Challenges

The major challenge facing the innovation is the large class sizes in primary school in Malawi. Continuous assessment requires assessing learners regularly to see what progress the learners are making. This can be time consuming in a large class. The second challenge is to train teachers how to construct their own assessment items. Without this training teachers might resort to developing items that assess only low-level cognitive skills.

INTEGRATION WITH PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

During the time the feasibility study was being conducted, a process of primary curriculum reform was set in motion. As part of needs assessment, research teams went into different communities asking groups of people about what they thought should be done in order to have an inclusive curriculum that is responsive to the changing needs of the Malawian society. The research teams visited rural, semi urban and urban areas in twenty-four districts in the country. The groups included community leaders, women, men, school dropouts, pupils, teachers and school committees. Each of the groups was interviewed separately. There was also a desk review of literature on basic education in Malawi as well as in six other countries in the sub-region. Finally, teams of ministry's inspectors visited and observed lessons in sixty primary schools.

Data from the four sources were analysed. Among other things the data showed that people wanted the existing assessment procedures re-examined. Furthermore, just before the reform process was officially launched, the Malawi National Examinations Board organised a national conference on assessment. Delegates to the conference expressed the need to re-examine the current practice.

A more formal link with the curriculum started in January 2003. During this time there was an international conference where Malawi's needs were presented. IEQ was given a slot to present what teachers were doing in the feasibility study. A nine-minute video was presented and a teacher from one of the schools gave detailed account of what she does in her class concerning continuous assessment, remediation and enrichment. The conference was followed by a two-week workshop in which educators looked at the needs drawn from the four sources. IEQ made a display at the workshop. At the end of the workshop continuous assessment featured highly in the final document that was produced. Continuous assessment was therefore carried forward to the primary curriculum conceptualisation conference which took place in Blantyre during the last week of February 2003.

The curriculum framework from the conceptualisation conference has recommended that during the first two years of schooling pupils should wholly be assessed through continuous assessment and that in Standards 2-6, 60% of the assessment should be by continuous assessment. During the final year where assessment is used for certification and selection to secondary school 30% of the assessment should be continuous assessment.

This link between continuous assessment as developed in the feasibility study in Ntcheu and the curriculum being developed is only beginning and it is ongoing. The initial signs seem to indicate that continuous assessment will probably be formally integrated with the curriculum but the process is still ongoing.

Conclusion

The feasibility study in Ntcheu has shown that continuous assessment can be used as a teaching tool instead of just being an evaluation instrument. When continuous assessment is integrated with curriculum pupils see the results of their performance as a springboard for further learning. The study has also generated enthusiasm among educators in Malawi. The proposals made by the curriculum conceptualisation participants to include continuous assessment as part of the curriculum is an illustration of their confidence in what continuous assessment can do to improve teachers' professional skills and pupil learning. However, this does not mean that there are no challenges. The large class sizes and the number of subjects have a bearing on how to proceed.

If the Ministry of Education Science and Technology accepts the proposals made at the conceptualisation conference, continuous assessment will be integrated with the primary school curriculum for the first time in Malawi. Nonetheless, implications of this on large-scale implementation will be quite challenging to educators in Malawi. Perhaps because of the wide publicity of the innovation and involvement of the cross-section of the stakeholders and the public, those directly involved with curriculum implementation and assessment are psychologically preparing for it.

References

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